



Workers' Perceptions Towards the Establishment of Workplace Forums in South African Industries

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of workers towards the establishment of workplace forums in South Africa industries. Workplace forums are committees of employees elected by employees for employees in a workplace. These bodies promote the interests of all employees in the workplace, not only of trade union members. In this study, 30 respondents (management and employees of all races and gender) were selected to participate from 230 employees using a simple random technique. The cluster system was used to divide the industry into departments from which the final respondents were selected. The observation method and most of the official records and statistics were also used to collect and solicit the necessary information for this research. The central view held by this study was that workplace forums are very useful in achieving efficiency in the workplace and that they help in improving trade union activities. The critical view of the study was that there are few workplace forums established in South African industries. This showed that, the industries should provide some possible measures for the establishment of the workplace forums to reduce industrial unrest. But the problem is that trade unions did not encourage this because they see workplace forum as a threat to them. Nonetheless, special attention was on workplace forums because it was taken as a second channel of representation which intended to be one of the primary instruments of the Labour Relations Act (LRA) to democratise the workplace. The study recommended that; workplace forums should be established in all industries. Trade unions should be involved in the workplace forums. There should be the prevention of the establishment of other forums within one organisation. Management and workers should work together to prevent impending conflict.

Keywords: *Workplace Forum; Trade Union; Conflict Resolution; Management; Workers' Perceptions*

Introduction

At the end of the 1970's a completely new labour relations dispensation was introduced in South Africa, but unexpected challenges emerged. From that time legal rights in the field of employment were accorded to everyone irrespective of race, colour, gender, or creed. It was expected that all problems that had been experienced before would be a thing of the past. However, from then, new challenges emerged.

The focus in the 1980's was on the policies and strategies of introducing the new order. During that time all the activities in industrial relations centred around power and influence, namely the politics of industry and labour economics. This period was marked by strife and conflict between management and the workers. The challenges of the late 1990's seem to be of a different nature. The focus has shifted from the political arena to the workplace. It could still be recalled that workplace forums were not implemented during the apartheid era (Kauth, 2020). In view of this research an attempt will be made to analyse the functions or roles which workplace forums and management could play in the new democratic South Africa. In addition to that, this research attempt to look at the various ways in which workplace forums could improve the elements of co-operation in the workplace.

A Historical Background on the Development of Workplace Forum in South Africa

It is generally acknowledged that industrial or labour relations in South African organisations have been characterised by antagonism, conflict and confrontation between management and employees. There are many reasons for this situation, of which the main causes are the political struggle and the adversarial nature of the past labour relations system. It is also evident that in most organisations, employees had little or no say in the running of the organisation. According to Greeff (2021), management in most organisations were found to be hostile to trade unions and do not see trade unions contributing to the development, growth, and co-operation of the organisation. This view has been held for many years. Black workers have been wary of workplace representation, seeing it as a play by management and the Apartheid State to undermine the unions. Now the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 marks a historic breakthrough with the past by providing for "a second channel of representation", the workplace forum (Mtayi, 1997). Workplace forums are intended to be one of the primary instruments of the Act to democratise the workplace. The Act proclaims that the functions of workplace forum are to promote the interests of all employees (whether they are union members or not), enhance efficiency in the workplace, provide for consultation between management and labour on specified issues, and, on others, require joint decision-making. Such decision-making envisages that management may not take certain decisions without the consensus of the workplace (Mtayi, 1997).

Origins of the Workplace Forum System

The concept behind workplace forums can be found in similar systems in developed countries such as Britain, Germany, and Sweden as well as previous experience with workers' committee and later with liaison committees at plant level in South Africa. The South African roots of the idea can be traced back to the establishment of workers' committees for black workers in terms of the Bantu Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953. These structures were to be established on the initiative of the workers themselves. This provision was like workplace forums today except that the workers then did not need to belong to a union (LRA No.66 of 1995). It was the intention of the Government to create a system that would assume the role of unions and hopefully result in the demise of trade unions. This system was not a success and only workers' committee registered by 1973 with possibly another in existence (Bendix, 1996). Another problem was that workers' committee was allowed only five members per plant irrespective of the number of workers employed. This system, which dealt mainly with grievances, had no negotiating authority, and very infrequently met with management, making the establishment of a working relationship impossible. Despite these obvious flaws this system, with adaptations, continued until 1979 as the only legitimate system for black worker representation. The 1973 strikes throughout South Africa resulted in the passing of the Black Labour Relations Regulation Act of 1973, which provided for the establishment of liaison committees at plant level as an alternative to worker's committees. These committees were to consist of an equal number of worker and management representatives. The main aim was to improve communication between the employer and his black workers (Van der Walt, 1998). There were however some organisations which supported trade unions (such as the Urban Training Project) which used the system to establish plant-level organisation and the

formation of unions. The Western Province Workers' Advice Bureau (WPWAB) believed that committee members should be trained to negotiate on their own behalf, eventually doing away with the need for union officials (Bendix, 1996).

Establishment of a Workplace Forum

Once the establishment of the forum has been requested by the relevant trade union(s) and the requirements for its creation have been met, a commissioner will be appointed by the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). The commissioner will try to facilitate agreement between the trade union(s) and the employer on the subject. If no agreement is reached, he will determine the provisions of the constitution of the workplace forum according to the Act. In doing so, he will consider the guidelines in the schedule to the Act. He will then set a date for the election of the members to the forum. An election officer will be appointed to conduct the election (Mtayi, 1997).

Conflict between employers and employees has been institutionalised in terms of an agreed upon set of rules and procedures. The net result is increasing stability in industrial society. No longer is the working class seen as a threat to social order as Marx believed. There is less and less chance of the kind of class conflict which Marx and Neo-Marxist predicted. The German sociologist Ralph Dahrendorf (1959) believes that the voice of the working class is growing louder through its formal associations. He sees a trend towards a more equal balance of power between employers and employees and the development of what he terms, "industrial democracy". He said democracy in industry begins with the formation of workers' interest groups. Interest groups are necessary to represent workers since employers cannot negotiate with a disorganised collection of employees. For workers' interest groups to be effective, they must be recognised as legitimate by employers and the state. This has been an uphill struggle in capitalist societies (Nel & Kirsten, 2000). In nineteenth century, Britain employers strongly resisted the formation of trade unions often. They insisted that their workers sign a document declaring that they were not union members. In America, particularly during the 1930s, organised crime syndicates were sometimes employed by companies to prevent their workforce forming trade unions. However, by the latter half of this century, trade unions were generally accepted as legitimate by employers and the State (Godfrey et.al, 2010). Dahrendorf regards this as the major step towards industrial democracy and the institutionalisation of industrial conflict (Haralambos, 1980). With the formation of workers' interest groups, several processes occurred. They furthered the integration of the working class into the structure of capitalist society. Firstly, negotiating bodies were set up for formal negotiation between representatives of employers and workers. Such negotiations take place within a framework of agreed upon rules and procedures. Conflict is largely contained and resolved within this framework (Biasi, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Neo-Marxist theory Hyman (1975) states that while the rules, and the institutions which devise and implement them, are of central importance to the study of industrial relations, Dunlop's perspective is too restrictive and value laden. He argues that Dunlop's systems theory implies that industrial relations is about the maintenance of stability and regularity in industry. The focus is on how disputes are contained and controlled rather than on the process through which conflict is generated. Further, Hyman criticises the belief that trade unions and employers are involved in a process of seeking 'order' in industrial relations. He espouses the Marxist perspective that workers do not share a common ideology with employers in maintaining the prevailing social structure of capitalism. Thus, industrial relations involve actors whose aims are largely contradictory. He argues that the obligations undertaken by the employer in the employment contract are relatively precise, e.g., wages, leave and fringe benefits are fixed. The orderliness of the Dunlop system of industrial relations is thus rejected. Hyman consequently defines

industrial relations as "the study of process of control over work relations"(Finnermore, 2009; Screpanti, 2019).

Marxist and neo-Marxist theories of revolution identify the material or economic organization of a given society, that is, the forces and relations of production, as the principle context determining revolutionary conflicts, which are understood as particularly acute struggles between social classes. For Marxists, revolutions are the result of class struggles between dominant 'ruling' classes, on the one hand, and 'rising' or revolutionary classes, on the other. Revolutionary situations are understood to develop during those historical periods when the development of the forces of production (technology, skills, the division of labor) comes into conflict with the existing relations of production, or class relations, which are based on the ownership and control of productive property (Screpanti, 2019). During revolutionary situations, the existing social system is paralyzed, as it were, and further social development requires a fundamental reorganization of the economy or mode of production, as well as of the state, by the revolutionary class. In short, objective structural conditions produce growing class antagonisms that culminate in the overthrow of the existing state and economic order. The state itself is seen by many Marxists as an instrument of the dominant class, and politicians and bureaucrats are attributed little autonomy as independent political agents. (Other Marxists suggest that such autonomy as the state may possess is functional for the formulation of far-sighted policies that are in the long-term interests of capitalism as opposed to short-term interests of particular capitalists or fractions of the capitalist class.) (Goodwin and Green, 2008).

Marx's Theory of Alienation/Estranged Labour

In sociology, alienation is when humans feel disconnected or estranged from some part of their nature or from society. Individuals can be alienated from themselves and from others, often resulting in feeling powerless or without control over their own lives. The term alienation was conceptualized by Karl Marx when he used alienation to describe the effects of capitalism on the working class. Before this, the meaning of alienation changed over the centuries. In theology, alienation referred to the distance between humanity and God; in social contact theories, it meant the loss of an individual's original freedom, whereas, in political economy, it referred to the transfer of property ownership (Musto, 2010).

The worker becomes all the poorer and alienated as his production increases. The worker becomes an ever-cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things (material) proceeds in direct proportion with the devaluation world of men (human life). Labour produces not only commodities, but it also produces itself and the worker as a commodity and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally (Guy-Evans, 2023). In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange, weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind master nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy (Mukhopadhyay, 2020).

The main premise of the theory is that private property caused alienation. This theory negated that man was also an agriculturalist and, by defining man and consciousness only in relation to industrial production, it treated man in a one-dimensional manner. According to (Marx 1990 & Marx 1993), alienation, separation of the worker from himself, his species, fellow human beings, labour, and the product of his labour, is inversely proportional to ownership of the means of production. One premise of this theory is that wage-labour creates surplus value that is the source of private property. Private property, in turn, causes alienation and was defined as owned income. This was the basis of the rationale for the proletariat to have appropriated the means of production (Tummers & Den Dulk, 2013).

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed method approach. A questionnaire survey and an interview technique were used to solicit the necessary information. The researcher manipulates no situation or condition, respondents simply answer questions. In questionnaire survey, numerous closed-ended questions were asked in a short time. The answers and questions were summarized in percentages and tables. To supplement the questionnaire survey, it was used in combination with the interview study method for the purposes of reaching a broad spectrum of the respondents. The main part of the interview consists of asking questions and accurately recording answers. This is easy for closed-ended questions. The interviewer knows how and when to use probes. A probe is a neutral request to clarify an ambiguous answer, to complete an incomplete answer, or to obtain a relevant response. Quantitative data was analysed using the chi-square test (χ^2) to generate descriptive statistics showing frequencies and percentages, while the qualitative data was analysed manually by creating themes to generate results.

The rationale for using these instruments for the collection of data in this research, was mainly because of their suitability and relevance to the nature and purposes of this research. A questionnaire survey was used for it meets favourable some of the aims of this study. They were presented in a written format and respondents wrote their answers. Besides some shortcomings that most researchers will associate with a questionnaire, the researcher feels that the questionnaire was however, most suitable, and relevant to use in collecting data for this investigation. In this regard Mouly (1972) stated that, although the questionnaire may have certain weaknesses, it remains however, the most widely used technique in normative research. The use of a questionnaire was justified by its ability to allow a wide coverage with the minimum effort, financial expenditure, and time consumption. In this way it afforded greater validity and reliability in results because it was able to place more candid and objective responses because of its impersonality. Mrwetyana (1983) in Ndlala (1985) concurs with the above view by saying that the questionnaire seems to be the best tool to use in instances where not all "the respondents are within easy reach in any given target population. It is for similar reasons and consideration that the questionnaire was used in this research. The statistical method on the other hand was to develop tests for assessing the level of rejection of a hypothesis, that is, to determine the probability of an error being produced in generalizing a property of a sample to the entire population. The multiplicity of such tests reflects the variety of problems and conditions (Mukhopadhyay, 2020).

In this study a chi-square test (χ^2) was used because it is a commonly used non-parametric test. Non-parametric tests are statistical tests that analyse data without assumptions about the distribution. The chi-square test (χ^2) simply tests whether the observed or actual frequency of a phenomenon corresponds to the frequency which should have been recorded, that is, which is expected if the hypothesis under study was correct. It is thus based on comparison between observed frequencies and expected frequencies, that is, between the given facts and the theoretical anticipation, to assess whether the facts support the theoretical considerations (Turhan, 2020).

According to Lavakush (2022), the chi-square (χ^2) test is a test of significance of the observed differences (like the student test), a measure of correspondence between the facts and theory. However, the chi-square test does not give any information about the degree of the relationship or association between the variables. Its strength resides in the breadth of its applications: if the data are of a nominal nature, their frequency of occurrence in each separate category is recorded. Being a non-parametric test, the chi-square test does not assume a normal distribution of the population nor require any other parametric conditions to be fulfilled. It addresses itself to random independent samples or groups. As mentioned above, the aim of the chi-square test is to compare the observed and expected frequencies to assess whether the observed data support the hypothesis.

Thus, the general expression of this test is:

$$X = \sum \frac{(\text{observed frequency} - \text{Expected frequency})^2}{\text{Expected frequency}}$$

To perform this analysis, the data must be presented in a contingency table, each category in its cell, and the expected frequency computed. Moreover, the degrees of freedom of the problem must be defined, and the χ^2 -table must be consulted. The significance level was chosen, this is the criterion for deciding when observed difference is significant or not, that is, when a null hypothesis (H_0) must be rejected or not. The level of significance is symbolized by the Greek letter α : (which reads alpha). H_0 belittles or even denies the difference between two groups while H_1 emphasize the experimental group as being different from the control group (Islam, 2021).

Results and Discussion

This section discusses the workers perceptions towards the establishment of workplace forum.

In view of this, the following hypotheses were investigated:

- (a) To find out if workplace forum helps in improving trade union activities.
- (b) To find out workers perception in the possibility of achieving efficiency through workplace forum.
- (c) To find out if workplace forums are useful in resolving conflict.
- (d) To find out respondents' view on problems that hinders the establishment of workplace forum.

The Improvement of Trade Union Activities through the Workplace Forum

Hypothesis 1

H_0 : Workplace forum does not help in improving trade union activities.

H_1 : Workplace forum helps in improving trade union activities.

Table 1

Respondents' view	Female	Male	Total
Yes	9 (8.7)	20 (20.3)	29
No	0 (0.3)	1 (0.7)	1
Total	9	21	30

Observed $\chi^2 = 0.44$

Critical value = 3.84

Df = 1

Level of significance α : = 0.05

Therefore, H_1 is accepted because the observed χ^2 is less than the critical value.

This confirms that workplace forum helps in improving trade union activities.

The contingency “C” = 0.12

This therefore shows that there is a weak relationship between the improvement of the trade union activities and the workplace forum.

The above table 1 reveals that 20 male respondents out of 21 respondents are of the view that workplace forum helps in improving trade union activities. Only one (1) male respondent is of the view that workplace forum does not help in improving trade union activities. It also shows that all nine (9) female respondents agree that workplace forum helps in improving trade union activities. This research finding confirms the analysis of Van Holdt (1995) that workplace forums could be a break-through in the struggle for democracy at work. Workplace forums could provide unions with the tools to improve the quality of working life and prevent management from unilaterally restructuring the workplace. It is said that workplace forums offer the unions an opportunity to intervene in management decision making and shape decisions to meet worker's interests. Van Holdt (1995) says that workplace forum could provide the focus, the powers, and the resources to revitalise union organisation in the workplace.

However, the forums undoubtedly raise several concerns for unions, some practical and some principled. The forums provide unions with the opportunity to increase capacity through rights to training, paid time off, full time representatives, administrative facilities and hopefully finances to commission expects. It is also said that forums will entail a greater emphasis on co-operation. But it must be stressed that this co-operation does not mean the end of conflict and struggle.

The Role of the Workplace Forum in Achieving Efficiency in Production System

Hypothesis 2

H₀: Workplace is not useful in achieving efficiency in industry.

H₁: Workplace forum is useful in achieving efficiency in the industry.

Table 2

Respondents' view	Female	Male	Total
Yes	3 (4.2)	11 (9.8)	14
No	6 (4.8)	10 (11.2)	16
Total	9	21	30

Observed $\chi^2 = 0.918$

Critical value = 3.84

Df = 1

Level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$

Therefore, H₁ is accepted because the observed χ^2 is less than the critical value.

This therefore confirms that workplace forum is useful in achieving efficiency in the industry.

The contingency “C” = 0.17

This shows that there is a weak relationship between the efficiency in industry and the usefulness of the workplace forum.

The above table 2 reveals that 11 (male) respondents out of 21 respondents are of the view that workplace forums are useful in achieving efficiency in industry. Ten (10) male respondents are of the view that workplace forums are not useful in achieving efficiency in industry. Three (3) out of 9 female respondents agree that workplace forums are useful in achieving efficiency in industry and six (6) are of the view that workplace forums are not useful in achieving efficiency in industry. This analysis therefore confirms one of the expected functions of the of the workplace forum as clearly stipulated by the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995 namely, they must seek to enhance efficiency in the workplace and to participate in joint decision making to mention a few. According to Van Holdt (1998), the workplace forums provide unions with a firm and stable base to engage in issues of production, efficiency, and quality without always submitting to management's agenda. He mentioned that workplace forum provides unions with the opportunity to increase capacity through rights to training, paid time off, full time representatives, administrative facilities and hopefully finances to commission experts. Involvement in workplace forums could increase workers' identification with the interest of the enterprise and its productivity and competitive position, and so undermine class solidarity. In that way this analysis confirms that workplace forum is useful in achieving efficiency in the workplace.

The Role of the Workplace Forum in Conflict Resolution

Hypothesis 3

H₀: Workplace is not useful in resolving conflict.

H₁: Workplace forum is useful in resolving conflict.

Table 3

Respondents' view	Female	Male	Total
Yes	8 (6.9)	15 (16.1)	23
No	1 (2.1)	6 (4.9)	7
Total	9	21	30

Observed $\chi^2 = 1.07$

Critical value = 3.84

Df = 1

Level of significance $\alpha = 0.05$

Therefore, H₁ is accepted because the observed χ^2 is less than the critical value.

This therefore confirms that workplace forum is useful in in resolving conflict.

The contingency "C" = 0.19

This shows that there is a relationship between the usefulness of the workplace forum and conflict resolution.

Table 3 above reveals that 15 male respondents out of 21 respondents are of the view that workplace forums are useful in resolving conflict and six (6) male respondents are of the view that workplace forums are not useful in resolving conflict. Eight (3) out of 9 female respondents agree that workplace forums are useful in resolving conflict and only one (1) female respondent is of the view that workplace forums are not useful in resolving conflict. This analysis therefore concurs with *Greeff (2021)*, who asserted that workplace forums are designed to facilitate a shift at the workplace, from adversarial collective bargaining on all matters to joint problem-solving. Workplace forums are also designed to perform functions that collective bargaining cannot easily achieve, that is, the joint solution of problems and the resolution of conflicts over production. Workplace forums expand worker representation beyond the limits of collective bargaining by providing workers with an institutionalised voice in managerial decisions (Okharedia, 2007). A workplace forum must be given an opportunity to make representations or proposals, after which the employer must invoke any agreed dispute procedure before proceeding to implement a decision. If no agreement between the employer and the workplace forum is possible, the dispute must be referred to either arbitration or to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation, and Arbitration (CCMA) (The Ministerial Legal Task Team, 1997).

Respondents' View on Problems That Hinders the Establishment of Workplace Forum

Table 4

Respondents' views	Number	Percentage
Union problems	8	27
Management concerns towards non-disclosure of information.	13	43
Establishment of other forums within the organization.	3	10
Relationship between the workers and the employees.	6	20
Total	30	100

Table 4 above shows that forty three percent (43%) of the respondents agreed that the management interest towards the non-disclosure or abuse of information hinders the establishment of the workplace forum. Eight percent (8%) reported that union problems also hinder the establishment of the workplace forum. This indicates their awareness about different interests and goals between management and trade unions. Only three percent (3%) of the respondents reported that other forums existing within the plant might hinder the establishment of the workplace forum. Their views show a significant relationship with the early hypothesis formulated by this research. The views that were given by some of the respondents revealed that there are many problems hindering the establishment of the workplace forum. Among other things, they pointed out that different interests between the workers and employers, union problems, management concerns towards non-disclosure of information and the establishment of other forums within the organisation are also problems that might hinder the establishment of the workplace forum.

This discussion of the research findings showed that there is a great deal of agreement between the views and perceptions of the respondents who are included in the sample. This showed that there is a significant relationship between several issues and factors pertaining the role of the workplace forum, such as that for helping in reducing conflict in industries.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this research was to find out by means of empirical investigation whether there are any benefits from the workplace forum. A wide range of relevant literature was reviewed. Based on the data analysis, it was found that many of the respondents are suitably qualified for the work they do. It was felt that the respondents who are not well educated/trained for their jobs see no benefits from the workplace forum whereas those who are suitably qualified see the benefits. This shows that education is a considerable factor in the relationship between the views of the respondents about the helpfulness of the workplace forum and their educational qualifications. This concludes that, the more people become educated, the more they realize the need and the helpfulness of the workplace forum in industry as far as industrial peace is concerned. On the basis of the recommendations made, it was recommended that the management should provide the information and indicate its confidentiality to the employees, the trade union and any bargaining agent should be involved in the forum so as to prevent industrial unrest, there should be the prevention of the establishment of other forums within the organisation, workplace forums can help in achieving efficiency in the workplace by looking at the job descriptions and make recommendations. This showed that there is a need for the establishment of the workplace forum in industries. The following proposed solutions were made for the purposes of reducing conflict in the workplace: it was proposed that companies should train managers so that they can handle conflicts and maintain harmony in the workplace, it was also proposed here that the plan should be communicated and every worker should be involved, supervisor should be concerned when an employee show signs of serious personal stress, a company should have a strong policy that prohibits any form of harassment or threatening behaviour. Finally, it was also proposed that companies should develop a crisis management team to handle violent incidents before, during, and after they occur.

Conflict cannot be isolated. It is part of our life so there should be some ways of minimizing it. The need for the establishment of the workplace forum could not be over emphasized. However, this can only be best achieved if and only if, the industries are appropriately and adequately organised in their management styles. It is hoped that the above recommendations and solutions if implemented will bring some changes in the problems that might hinder establishment of the workplace forum in industries. When that happen, the rate of conflict will show a significant decline. This will contribute towards the general enhancement of the quality of working life in industries.

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